

*Congressman Bachus entered the following statement recognizing the tradition of National Veterans Day in Birmingham in the Congressional Record on August 2, 2012.*

Honoring our veterans and their families for the sacrifices they have made to protect the freedoms that we enjoy as Americans is not only proper, but a privilege that should always be cherished.

On November 11, 2012, Birmingham, Alabama will mark its 65<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of serving a national model for the commemoration of Veterans Day. Birmingham's Veterans Day ceremonies are the oldest and largest in our country. The legacy extends across generations.

Birmingham's reputation as "the cradle of National Veterans Day" first took root in the final months of World War II.

Originally, November 11 was recognized as Armistice Day to solemnly commemorate the end of World War I, which was supposedly "war to end all wars."

Barely more than two decades later, America's soldiers would be again called to duty, this time to confront the gravest threat to individual freedom in world history.

As World War II ended with the defeat of the Axis powers, Birmingham's Raymond Weeks, a Navy veteran, began a new mission that would define the rest of his life: ensuring that the service and sacrifices of all of America's men and women in uniform would not be forgotten.

In 1945, the concept of a National Veterans Day became fixed in his mind. In 1946, he personally took a petition and a proposed program, "National Veterans Day 1947," urging the creation of a national holiday to honor all veterans to General Dwight Eisenhower, who was then the Army Chief of Staff. In 1954, then-President Eisenhower signed legislation formally establishing November 11 as Veterans Day.

In presenting the Presidential Citizens Medal to Raymond Weeks on Veterans Day 1982, President Reagan said, “Mr. Weeks has exemplified the finest traditions of American volunteerism by his unselfish service to his country. As director of the National Veterans Day Celebration in Birmingham for the past 36 years, Raymond Weeks, a World War II veteran himself, has devoted his life to serving others, his community, the American veteran, and the nation. He was the driving force behind the congressional action which in 1954 established this special holiday as a day to honor all Americans veterans.”

The tradition of respect and honor established by National Veterans Day in Birmingham would be ably carried on by Raymond Weeks’ successor, Colonel Bill Voigt. To this pivotal position of community leadership, Colonel Voigt brought his experience from the Alabama Air National Guard and U.S. Air Force Reserves and a deep and abiding concern for our veterans. His dedication went above and beyond duty. New leadership has been being tasked to continue this tradition.

As we look toward the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of America’s first Veterans Day and to 2014, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the legal holiday, we can cast our vision. It is to continue to honor our veterans.

We would do well by restoring emphasis on General Eisenhower’s request of Raymond Weeks in 1947 for Veterans Day to perpetuate world peace: “I wish you every success in your purpose of arousing all American citizens to the need for cooperating among ourselves to the utmost to achieve the greatest of all goals – assurance of enduring peace.”

The history of Veterans Day is a lesson in character education that can be used to inspire students to learn “living history” from our veterans. Alabama teaches character traits daily, including those illuminated by the history of the founding of Veterans Day – patriotism, courage, perseverance, loyalty and citizenship. Raymond Weeks demonstrated these qualities in his pursuit of the creation of a National Veterans Day and stands as an example of good citizenship for all students and every generation.

The symmetry of service has been a powerful constant through the generations in Alabama.

As an example, recently a rededication was held for the Rainbow Viaduct Memorial in Birmingham, which commemorates the heroism of the 167<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry during World War I. At that same ceremony, members of the modern-day 167<sup>th</sup>

Alabama National Guard were recognized as they prepared for deployment to Afghanistan. Almost a century apart, the challenges may be different but the ethos of service and duty remains the same.

It is important to remember both what we honor and who we honor on Veterans Day. We honor soldiers and their devotion to freedom, yes. But we reflect that these are people around us who have willingly and unselfishly served on our behalf: fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, grandparents, a favorite uncle or cousin, a high school buddy or college roommate, a best friend or a childhood playmate.

Some we have joyfully welcomed back from an assignment or waved at during a parade. Others we thank at their gravesite, shedding a tear in their memory. We thank them for their sacrifice, bravery, and patriotism. We forget none of them.

This is what inspires us as we prepare for the annual observance of Veterans Day this coming November, and it is what continues to motivate my native Birmingham to set the highest standard for honoring those who have preserved the precious gift of freedom for all of us.